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ABSTRACT

Intended for parents of handicapped children, the booklet answers questions about professionals in four areas (medicine, psychology, education, and social services). Information is provided on the following professionals: pediatrician, neurologist, child psychiatrist, orthopedic specialist, ophthalmologist, optometrist, clinical psychologist, school psychologist, educational diagnostician, special education teacher, speech pathologist, audiologist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, and social worker. Explained is the role of each professional in treating the handicapped child. (SBH)

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Who Can Help?

What Professionals Can Do for You and Your Handicapped Child

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CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction	1
The Medical Professionals	2
The Pediatrician	2
The Neurologist	3
The Child Psychiatrist	3
The Orthopedic Specialist	4
The Ophthalmologist	4
The Optometrist	4
The Psychology Professionals	5
The Clinical Psychologist	5
The School Psychologist	6
The Educational Professionals	7
The Educational Diagnostician	7
The Special Education Teacher	8
The Speech Pathologist	9
The Audiologist	9
The Physical Therapist	10
The Occupational Therapist	10
The Social Work Professionals	11
The Social Worker	11

Introduction

Your newborn daughter seems perfect to you. You take her home and she appears to be growing and developing normally. However, you soon begin to notice that she doesn't turn her head in the direction of your voice when you call her name, and she isn't startled by sudden loud noises. You're concerned that she might have a hearing problem, and you seek the help of your family doctor. After a brief examination of your daughter, the doctor suggests you take her to be evaluated by an audiologist.

Your son is in first grade, and from time to time you are contacted by his teacher. She tells you that your son seems to be having trouble learning to read, and that he often misbehaves in class. Then you are notified by the School District that your child has been referred to the school psychologist. Since the school psychologist believes it would be advisable to further evaluate your son's difficulties, the School District is requesting your permission to go ahead with this procedure.

As in these two cases, there are many situations that could indicate your child might have a handicapping condition that requires the attention of trained professionals. But how do you, as parents find out who can help you and your child? How do you know what different professionals are trained to do, so that you can be certain your child receives the right kind of help? How can you judge if a professional is well-trained and qualified, and what he will expect of you as he treats your child?

This booklet will answer your questions about many different professionals in four general areas:

Medicine Psychology Education Social Services

2

The Medical Professionals

The Pediatrician:

Regular health care is necessary for every child. Medical doctors who specialize in caring for children are called pediatricians. Pediatricians treat all kinds of childhood illnesses, and the general growth and development of the children they see regularly.

Since your child will be seen by a pediatrician for regular check-ups, he is likely to be the professional who will know your child best. Often, it will be the pediatrician who first identifies problems in your child's growth and development, indicating that a handicapping condition is present. Therefore, the pediatrician will play a crucial role in the medical treatment of your handicapped child.

It is important for you, as parents of a handicapped child, to have confidence in your pediatrician. Pediatricians hold either the Doctor of Medicine degree (M.D.) with certification by the American Board of Pediatrics, or the Doctor of Osteopathy degree (D.O.) with certification by the American Osteopathic Board of Pediatrics. Your local or state medical society can give you a list of pediatricians in your community. You can also contact the American Academy of Pediatrics, P.O. Box 1034, Evanston, Illinois 60204 for additional information. Since all pediatricians are not equally interested or skilled in working with handicapped children, you should talk with your pediatrician to determine if you both feel that he can serve your child's special medical needs.

Of ourse, your handicapped child will probably need to see more than one physician to get all the medical care he requires. The pediatrician will still play a primary role in your child's treatment, by serving as a coordinator of the various specialists who your child will see from time to time. It is very helpful to find a pediatrician who is willing to coordinate all of your child's medical contacts, while he himself goes on attending to such "ordinary" matters as treating colds and viruses or giving you advice about general child-rearing practices.

The Neurologist:

Some handicapping conditions require that a child be examined by a neurologist. The neurologist specializes in diagnosing and treating disorders of the central nervous system. The central nervous system is made up of the brain, spinal cord, and nerves, which all work together to tell us what is going on outside of our bodies; to enable us to think about this information and make decisions; and finally, to control our muscles so that we can make necessary movements and actions. The neurologist will try to find out if your child's central nervous system is working properly and, if not, what is causing the problem.

The neurologist holds the Doctor of Medicine degree (M.D.) or the Doctor of Osteopathy degree (D.O.). Some neurologists, who have had special training in dealing with disorders of the nervous system in infants and children, are called pediatric neurologists, but there are relatively few doctors in this particular specialty.

In all likelihood, you will take your child to a neurologist who has been recommended by a pediatrician or other physician. The neurologist will make a diagnosis based on the results of his examination and, if appropriate, he will suggest a plan of treatment. Your child will probably need to be reevaluated on a regular basis, say, every few years, so it is important that all of his neurological examination records be accessible. As with any professional, you should feel free to question the neurologist about his findings so that you can better understand your child's handicapping condition.

The Child Psychiatrist:

If your child seems to be having an emotional problem or some difficulty in adjusting to the demands of his world, he will probably benefit from the attention of a child psychiatrist. The child psychiatrist is specially trained to understand not only the reasons that make a child behave in certain ways, but also the feelings the child carries around inside him. The child psychiatrist does not seek to blame anyone for a child's emotional difficulties. Instead, he uses his training and skill as an observer and interpreter of human behavior to help a troubled child feel better about himself, his family, and his place in the world.

The child psychiatrist holds either the Doctor of Medicine degree (M.D.) with certification in both the specialties of general psychiatry and child psychiatry by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology, or the Doctor of Osteopathy Degree (D.O.) with certification by the American Osteopathic Board of Psychiatry and Neurology. A pediatrician or other doctor can refer you to a child psychiatrist. You can also inquire at local mental health centers, at child guidance clinics, or at local hospitals to find a child psychiatrist who you feel is able to help your child.

The child psychiatrist's role includes both diagnosis and treatment. At both stages in this process, you, as parents, will be actively involved. Diagnosis of your child's problem will entail preliminary meetings between you and the child psychiatrist to compile a history of your child's development and to explore patterns of family and parent-child interaction. After working for a while with your child, the psychiatrist will assess his problem and discuss a treatment plan with you. This plan might involve the use of medication to alleviate severe stresses; recommendations for individual counseling or psychotherapy; play therapy, family therapy, or a combination of medication and psychotherapeutic sessions. In any case, the treatment of your child's emotional problems is likely to take quite a while, and the child psychiatrist will need your direct involvement and cooperation in order to help your child as much as he possibly can.

The Orthopedic Specialist:

If your child has a physical handicap, he should be seen by an orthopedic specialist, who is trained to deal with problems in the muscular and skeletal system of the body. Early recognition and treatment of muscle and bone problems is essential, since so much growth takes place during childhood and early treatment can often prevent deformity in later life. Orthopedic disorders are among the most common problems of childhood, and can stem from birth-related causes or from injuries that occur during a child's early years.

The orthopedist holds either the Doctor of Medicine degree (M.D.) with certification in the specialty of orthopedics by the American Board of Orthopedic Surgery, or the Doctor of Osteopathy degree (D.O.) with certification by the American Osteopathic Board of Orthopedic Surgery. Normally, orthopedic specialists are trained in performing orthopedic surgery, since this is a common method of treatment. You are likely to be referred to an orthopedist by another physician who has treated your child and recognized an orthopedic problem. Of course, not all orthopedists specialize in the care of handicapped children, so that it is helpful to find out if the orthopedist to whom you are referred has treated other patients with a handicapping condition similar to that of your own child.

Treatment of your child's orthopedic problem will depend upon its severity. The simplest form of treatment requires a program of home exercises and physical therapy. If your child's problem is more serious, he is likely to need more complex treatment, such as supports or braces, medication, intensive physical therapy, or even surgery. In any case, his course of treatment will require your understanding of what is being done and your cooperation with the professionals who are caring for him.

The Ophthalmologist:

If your child has a problem with his vision, he will need to be examined by an ophthalmologist or an optometrist. Since these two fields of specialization are sometimes confused, it is helpful to remember than an ophthalmologist is a physician, while an optometrist is not. For certain visual problems, your child will need to see an ophthalmologist; for others, an optometrist is the appropriate choice.

An ophthalmologist specializes in eye diseases, and injuries and other eye disorders. An ophthalmologist holds either the Doctor of Medicine degree (M.D.) with certification by the American Board of Ophthalmology, or the Doctor of Osteopathy degree (D.O.) with certification by the American Osteopathic Board of Ophthalmology. Your family doctor or staff members at the medical clinic you attend can refer you to a competent ophthalmologist, should an eye examination seem necessary for your child.

Since the ophthalmologist is a physician, he will be able to medically treat eye diseases or injuries. Also, if your child has a problem seeing clearly, the ophthalmologist will try to find out why and will prescribe glasses to correct the problem.

The Optometrist:

The optometrist, like the ophthalmologist, can evaluate a child for his ability to see objects clearly. Some optometrists may also specialize in the diagnosis of "visual perception" problems. "Visual perception" is a term that refers to the ability of the brain to interpret and understand what the eyes are seeing. It has nothing to do with how clearly the eyes can see, but rather what the brain does with the information sent to it by the eyes.

The optometrist must complete a college-level program of training in optometry and is certified, after passing an examination, by the state in which he practices. Your family doctor, your child's pediatrician, or staff members of the medical clinic you attend can recommend an optometrist to evaluate your child's vision.

After identifying your child's visual problem, an optometrist may prescribe glasses in order to help him see more clearly. The optometrist can also suggest other methods of treatment, such as exercises to straighten the eyes. However, because he is not a physician, he cannot prescribe any medication.

The Psychology Professionals

The Clinical Psychologist:

If your child seems to be having difficulty in his intellectual, emotional, or social development, he may need the help of a clinical psychologist. Clinical psychology is often confused with psychiatry. While professionals in both these areas work with individuals who have adjustment problems, the psychologist is trained in the behavioral sciences while the psychiatrist is trained in medicine. Being a physician, the psychiatrist can prescribe medication, which is something the psychologist cannot do. However, professionals in both areas are skilled in diagnosing and treating emotional problems.

The clinical psychologist holds either the Master's degree (M.A., M.S., M.Ed.) or Doctoral degree (Ph.D., Ed.D., Psy.D.) in the specialty of clinical psychology. Clinical psychologists with five or more years of experience beyond the doctoral degree are also eligible for the Diplomate in Clinical Pyschology awarded by the American Board of Examiners in Professional Psychology of the American Psychological Association. Clinical psychologists may be licensed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as private practitioners. A sub-specialty of clinical psychology, called clinical-child psychology, deals specifically with the emotional development of children. Your family doctor or your child's pediatrician can refer you to a clinical psychologist. You can also contact local mental health centers, child guidance clinics, or hospitals to find a competent clinical psychologist. It may be helpful to find a psychologist who is experienced in treating handicapped children.

You, as a parent, will be involved in your child's psychological assessment. You will provide the clinical psychologist with the background information he needs to understand your child's problems. It is also possible that part of your child's treatment will involve sessions in which your whole family participates, so that the clinical psychologist can see how your handicapped child interacts with the people who are close to him.

The School Psychologist:

Once your handicapped child is old enough to attend school, he will come into contact with a professional called a school psychologist. The school psychologist's chief concern is the way your child learns, and how much he adjusts to the school situation. He will work with you and other school staff members to identify any learning or behavioral problems your child might have and he will help plan an educational program to meet your child's needs.

The school psychologist holds either the Master's degree (M.A., M.S., M.Ed.) or Doctoral degree (Ph.D., Ed.D., Psy.D.) in the specialty of school psychology. School psychologists with five or more years of experience beyond the doctoral degree are also eligible for the Diplomate in School Psychology, awarded by the American Board of Examiners in Professional Psychology of the American Psychological Association. In addition, school psychologists are certified by the State Department of Education for the provision of psychological services within the educational system and may be licensed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as private practioners.

The school psychologist will evaluate your child, based on your request or on the request of school staff members who have worked with your child and noticed that he has a problem related to school. The results of the assessment will be shared with you and with school staff members who deal with your child. The school psychologist will work with your child's teacher in developing a classroom program to help your child to learn better and to modify any behavior problems he might be having. The school psychologist will also consult regularly with your child's teacher to see how your child is getting along in class. If your child requires the services of other school-related professionals, the school psychologist will make the necessary referrals.

The Educational Professionals

The Educational Diagnostician:

In some school districts, the services of the educational diagnostician are available to handicapped children. The educational diagnostician is a specialist in assessing a child's learning skills and then prescribing an educational plan to meet his learning needs.

The educational diagnostician usually holds a Master's degree in education (M.A., M.S., M.Ed.). Frequently, the educational diagnostician is a former classroom teacher who has gone on to do graduate-level work in some educational specialty. The educational diagnostician in your school district may have the title of Itinerant Master Teacher, Reading Specialist, or Learning Disability Specialist. In any case, he will support the efforts of your child's classroom teacher by diagnosing learning abilities and developing educational plans.

If your child is evaluated by the educational diagnostician, it will be because of a request made by the school psychologist, or his classroom teacher. The diagnostician will administer a series of individual tests to determine exactly what your child knows, what he can do, and how he learns best. The educational diagnostician will then work closely with your child's classroom teacher, making recommendations about how to teach your child so that he can learn more readily. The educational diagnostician also works closely with other professionals in the school system. You, as parents, are likely to meet with the educational diagnostician at conferences when your child's educational program is discussed and planned.

The Special Education Teacher:

You, as parents of a handicapped child, will want to know how he is doing in school. Your best source for this kind of information is your child's teacher. Teachers of the handicapped are called special education teachers. If your child is in a self-contained class for handicapped children, his special education teacher has direct responsibility for planning and managing his everyday life in the classroom. Or, your child may come in contact with special education teachers in resource rooms during part of his school day. In this case, special education teachers will be directly responsible for giving him the special help he needs in his problem areas of learning.

The special education teacher holds at least the Bachelor's degree (B.A., B.S.), and may have earned an advanced degree in special education. Special education teachers are certified by the State Department of Education to teach children with different kinds of handicapping conditions. In any case, your child's special education teacher will understand the type of impairment your child has, and will be qualified to teach him in ways that will help him learn as much as he can.

The special education teacher works closely with other school-related professionals. He puts into practice the recommendations made by other professionals who have evaluated your child. He also plans and revises your child's everyday learning activities based on the day-to-day progress he sees in his classroom performance. You, as parents, have an important resource in your child's special education teacher. You can talk to the teacher any time you have questions or concerns about how your child is doing in school. The special education teacher will also maintain regular contact with you to review your child's progress and to suggest ways for you to help your child develop learning skills at home.

According to Pennsylvania law, some classes for the handicapped must be staffed by a teacher's aide as well as by special education teacher. The teacher's aide is responsible for helping the special education teacher manage classroom routines. The assistance of a teacher's aide allows the teacher more time to attend to the needs of individual children. However, the special education teacher still has direct responsibility for planning and carrying out your child's individual learning program.

The Speech Pathologist:

Certain types of handicapping conditions carry a high probability of speech and language difficulties. If your child has this problem, he will need the services of a speech pathologist. The speech pathologist is sometimes called a speech therapist. He will evaluate your child's speech and language, determine what kind of problem exists, and decide the best way to treat it.

The speech pathologist holds a Master's degree (M.A., M.S.) in the specialty of speech pathology. Speech pathologists who have completed one year of supervised experience beyond the Master's degree are also eligible for the Certificate of Clinical Competence awarded by the American Speech and Hearing Association. Speech pathologists who work in schools are certified by the State Department of Education for the provision of speech services within the educational system.

Where a speech problem appears in the early years of childhood, the pediatrician may refer your child to a speech pathologist. Or you may wish to obtain the help of a speech pathologist by contacting the Pennsylvania State Office of the American Speech and Hearing Association for a listing of local agencies and private practitioners. You can also contact the speech and hearing department of a local university, or you may call the speech specialist in your local public school.

When the speech pathologist has completed his evaluation of your child, he will discuss his findings with you and make recommendations for treatment. If the speech pathologist suggests a program of speech therapy, you should expect to be involved in helping your child at home. The speech pathologist will probably suggest ways for you to help your child develop his speech by reading, playing games, and even by talking about television programs. The speech pathologist will also work closely with other professionals and school staff members to help your child as much as possible.

The Audiologist:

Since a child's ability to speak is directly related to his ability to hear, the audiologist works closely with the speech pathologist. The audiologist is concerned with identifying children with a hearing impairment, measuring the degree of the hearing loss, and recommending ways of remediating the problem.

The audiologist holds a Master's degree (M.A., M.S.) in audiology and must be certified by passing a national examination to earn a Certificate of Clinical Competence. If a hearing loss is suspected when your child is quite young, a pediatrician or other doctor can recommend an audiologist to you. Should your child develop an ear disease at any time during his childhood, it is advisable to seek the help of an audiologist both before and after treatment. Once in school, your child may be referred to an audiologist following routine school hearing tests. Or you may suspect that your child is having difficulty hearing, and may wish to contact the Pennsylvania State Office of the American Speech and Hearing Association for a list of local agencies and professionals. You can also seek help from the speech and hearing department of a local university, or the hearing specialist in your local public school system.

If your child has a hearing impairment, you will probably work with the audiologist in order to help your child at home. For example, the audiologist may suggest that you develop the habit of speaking in a loud voice or of making sure that your child is looking directly at you when you speak to him. The audiologist will also work closely with other professionals to develop an educational plan which will help your child learn despite his hearing impairment.

The Physical Therapist:

If your child has a certain type of physical disability, he may benefit from the assistance of a physical therapist. The physical therapist is concerned with developing the strength and endurance of the body parts and in developing normal motor patterns, and in helping your handicapped child move easily so he becomes as independent as possible.

The physical therapist has completed a program of training in the therapeutic use of movement and physical activity. He holds either the Bachelor's degree (B.A., B.S.) or Master's degree (M.A., M.S.) in the specialty of physical therapy. The Licensed Physical Therapist (L.P.T.) has also completed a state examination and is licensed to practice in Pennsylvania. The physical therapist is usually affiliated with an agency, clinic, or school which offers a team approach for the treatment of handicapped children. He will see your child only upon the referral of a licensed physician. The referring physician may be a pediatrician, neurologist, or orthopedist.

The physical therapist will often train you, as parents, in daily treatment procedures to help your handicapped child at home. You may be taught to assist your child in a program of exercises or you may be asked to participate in certain play activities at home that will help your child build physical strength and endurance.

The Occupational Therapist:

Your handicapped child may have difficulty performing some basic everyday tasks, such as feeding or dressing himself. If so, he will benefit from the services of an occupational therapist. The occupational therapist is concerned with helping to build the skills your child will need to perform a variety of activities for daily living. He does this through therapy and by adapting the tools of everyday life so that your child can use them despite his handicap.

The occupational therapist has completed a program of training in child development, motor and perceptual skill development, and the therapeutic rehabilitation of daily living skills. He usually holds a Bachelor's degree (B.A., B.S.) in the specialty of occupational therapy. The Registered Occupational Therapist (O.T.R.) has also completed the national certification examination of the American Occupational Therapy Association. Most often, the occupational therapist is employed by an agency, clinic, or school offering a team approach to the care of handicapped children. Therefore, a referral to the occupational therapist usually takes place within such an agency.

In some cases, you may be instructed in specific occupational therapy tasks to carry out at home with your handicapped child. Or the occupational therapist may suggest that you use certain toys or games with your child to help him as he builds basic skills. In any event, you should encourage your child in home activities that will supplement his therapy, and you can find out how to be most supportive of your child by discussing his progress with the occupational therapist at regular intervals.

The Social Work Professionals

The Social Worker:

In many medical, mental health, and educational settings that provide services to your handicapped child, there are staff social workers who can give your family guidance and support. The social worker carries out a wide range of tasks in a variety of settings. He is concerned with the ways in which handicapped children and their families cope with the special difficulties they encounter, and he may provide counseling services to help overcome these difficulties. The social worker is also knowledgeable about community resources, and he can refer you to local agencies that might be helpful in meeting your special needs as parents of a handicapped child. Since the social worker is in close contact with other professionals who are treating your child, he can also serve to interpret their findings to you.

The social worker usually holds the Master's degree (M.S.W., M.S.S.S.) in the specialty of social work. Social workers with two years of supervised experience beyond the Master's degree are also eligible for certification, awarded by the Academy of Certified Social Workers (A.C.S.W.) of the National Association of Social Workers. If your child is being cared for in a medical or mental health setting which is staffed with social work professionals, a social worker will be assigned to your family. If you wish to seek these services on your own, you can contact United Community Services or the United Way about social service agencies in your community. To locate social workers in private practice in your community, you can contact the local chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

When talking with your social worker, you will be asked to discuss a variety of issues relating to your family's life together. Your contact with your social worker may be short-term or long-term, depending upon your needs and the kinds of services that are provided. If you build a comfortable relationship with your social worker, you will be able to seek his help with a variety of problems that you might encounter in the future.

Phone Numbers

Notes

Quick Reference Chart

A quick reference chart for determining the professionals who should be contacted to provide services to children with various handicapping conditions.

	Type of Handicapping Condition								
	Levels of Mental Retardation								
	Educable	Trainable	Severe & Profound	Visual Impairment	Hearing Impairment	Physical Impairment	Emotional Disturbance	Learning Disability	Other
MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS									
Pediatrician	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
Neurologist	S	S	S			S	S	N	1
Child Psychiatrist							N	S	2
Orthopedist						N			
Ophthalmologist				N				S	
Optometrist				N				S	
PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFESSIONALS									
Clinical Psychologist							N	S	2
School Psychologist	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS									
Educational Diagnostician	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	
Special Education Teacher	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
Speech Pathologist		S	S		N				3
Audiologist					N			S	3
Physical Therapist		S	S			N			4
Occupational Therapist		S	S			N			
SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONALS									
Social Worker	S	S	S	S	S	S	N	S	

KEY: N Necessary
S Suggested

1 - all children with seizures
2 - children with behavioral or adjustment problems
3 - children with disorders of communication
4 - children with motor problems

NOTE: If your child is multi-handicapped, you should contact the proper professionals to deal with each handicapping condition.